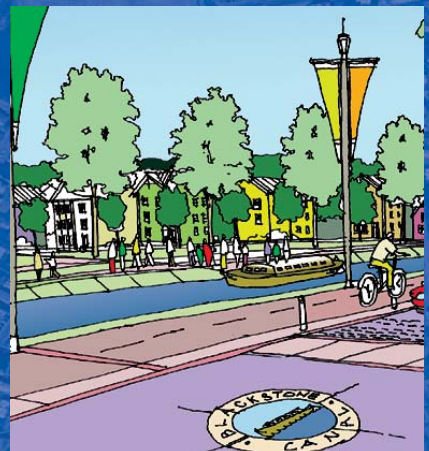
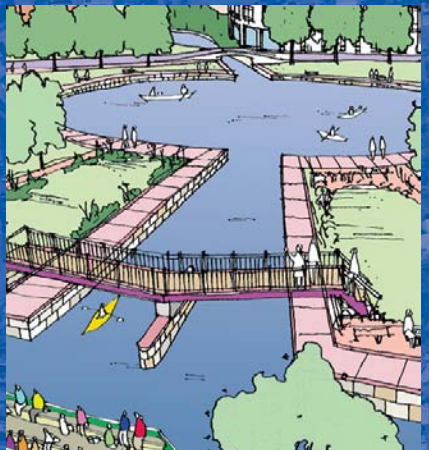
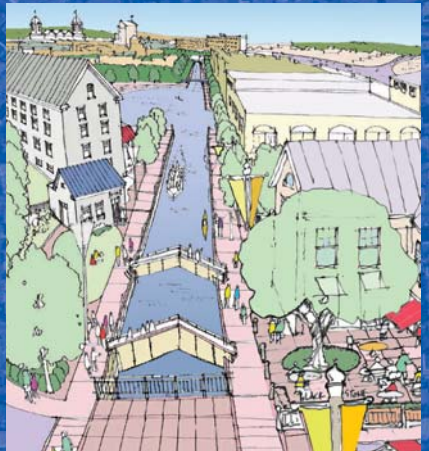
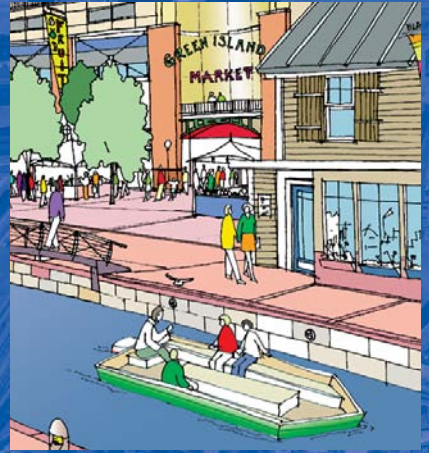


Free the Blackstone!

A Water Resource-based,
'Smart-Growth' Urban
Design Strategy for
Worcester, Massachusetts

March 2003



Blackstone Canal Feasibility Study

The City Council of Worcester
The Honorable Timothy P. Murray, Mayor
Thomas R. Hoover, City Manager
Philip J. Niddrie, Chief Development Officer

March 2003

The purpose of this study is to assess the potential impact on the City of Worcester and its neighborhoods, and to expose two of Worcester's most significant natural and historic resources, the Mill Brook and the Blackstone Canal.

The work has involved close communication with the City of Worcester, the Green Island business and residential community and the Blackstone Canal Task Force.

The Plan calls for the integrated implementation of a coordinated set of public and private initiatives that, taken together, will redefine Worcester's historic Canal District, creating a revitalized mixed-use neighborhood and an attractive, water-based urban amenity for the entire city.

A 1878 bird's-eye view of Worcester and the whole of the Canal District.

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The Opportunity

Worcester has a national story to tell. A significant part of that story involves the City's role in the innovation and enterprise that gave birth to the American Industrial Revolution. Recognizing its contribution to this important era in American history, the City of Worcester was made part of the John H. Chafee Blackstone River Valley National Heritage Corridor in 1996.

It was in the late eighteenth century that entrepreneurs first conceived of a canal utilizing the Blackstone River to connect Providence and Worcester. The Blackstone Canal, opened in 1828, helped change Worcester forever, and was the catalyst for the transformation of the City from a shire town to a center of industry. The opening of the canal and the arrival of the railroads in the 1830's brought dramatic growth, and it was the railroads that eventually put the Blackstone Canal out of business in 1848.



Worcester has a decided locational advantage in the heart of New England.



The Canal District, sitting at the head of the Blackstone River National Heritage Corridor and adjacent to major transportation services, is poised to become a new and exciting gateway to the Downtown and all of Worcester.

More importantly, the combination of vision, entrepreneurship and access to transportation set the stage for Worcester to come of age as a truly industrial city in the years after the Civil War. The canal and transportation once again can provide the spark to rejuvenate Worcester as we move into the 21st century. In combination with new highway and rail connections, the Blackstone Canal District initiative provides the opportunity to continue a regional tradition of innovation and enterprise and to build a new legacy for future generations.

The Concept

*"You must dig it up and let it run free once again. **Free the Blackstone.**"*

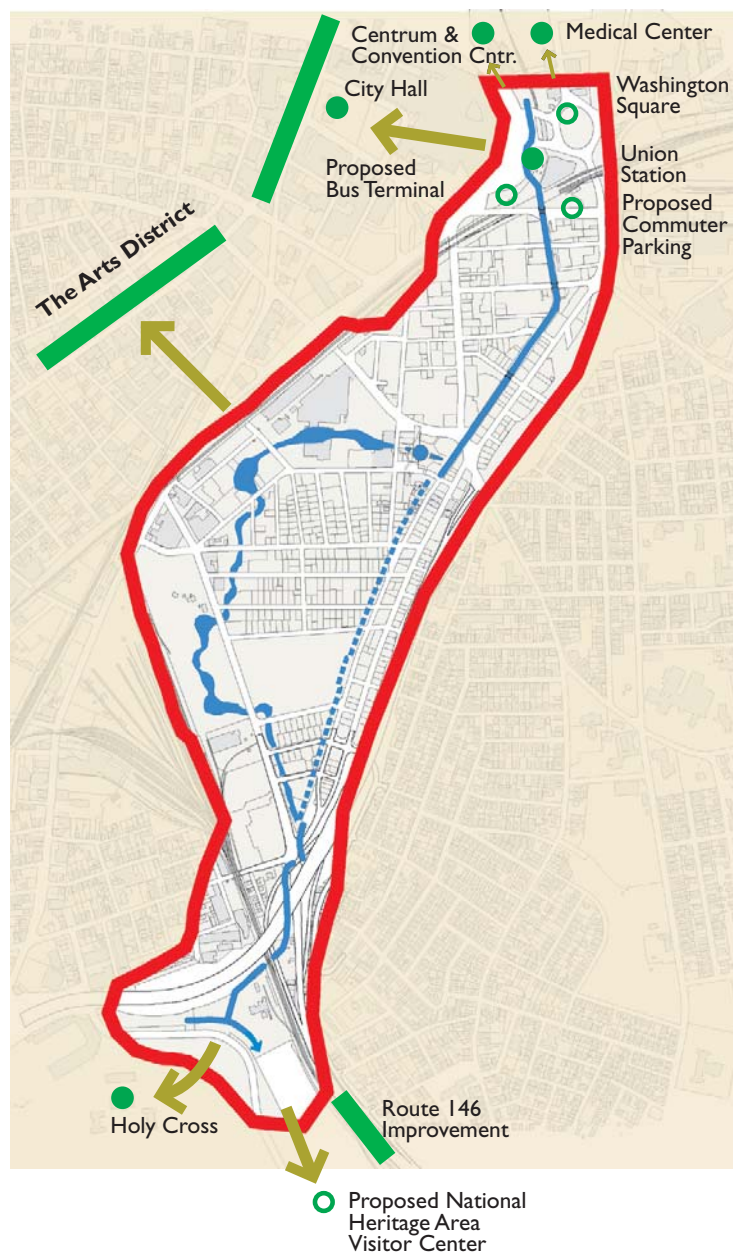
David Brower, the first executive director of the Sierra Club, and one of the principal founders of the environmental movement, during his 1992 visit to Worcester, after he was informed that the Blackstone Canal existed, buried under City streets.

The Blackstone Canal, which gave birth to this neighborhood, will become the instrument of its revitalization. A recreated canal and Mill Brook will provide a valuable water amenity and a memorable experience for people living, working and visiting the area. It will also serve as the armature for a new type of smart-growth, transit-oriented urban community with an identity that reaches out to the surrounding neighborhoods, institutions and the region.

Worcester's Canal District can become the national model of a 21st Century sustainable community. It has ready access to intermodal transportation, such as the commuter rail at Union Station, the Blackstone River Parkway (Route 146), and bike paths. It also has an abundance of underutilized land ready for reinvestment. With broad support from residents, business owners, and city government, this plan will have a dramatic and positive impact.

Most importantly, the Plan builds on a series of nearby City and institutional initiatives, either implemented or proposed, that reinforce Worcester's urban fabric and quality of life.

Relationship of Blackstone Canal District to other city initiatives



Core Elements

The Plan is grounded in a set of core goals and objectives for the District, established by the Task Force and Community early in the planning process.

1. **Tell the Canal District's story**
2. **Maximize the Canal District's waterfront potential**
3. **Respect the area's historic fabric**
4. **Take full advantage of underutilized parcels of land**
5. **Designate three themed Gateways: Washington, Kelley and Brosnihan Squares**
6. **Establish Kelley Square as a new front door to Worcester and the Canal District**
7. **Organize the Plan around the Canal District's squares, unique settings and water linkages**
8. **Create a pedestrian and bicycle network to and through the Canal District**



Union Station anchors the Northern Terminus area.

What is Smart Growth?

As defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Smart Growth* is development that "... serves the economy, the community, and the environment." Smart growth invests time, attention, and resources in restoring community and vitality to existing cities and older suburbs. Smart growth principles defined by EPA are consistent with the recommendations of this plan and include:

- Mix land uses
- Take advantage of compact building design
- Create a range of housing opportunities and choices
- Create walkable neighborhoods
- Foster distinctive, attractive communities with a strong sense of place
- Preserve open space, farmland, natural beauty, and critical environmental areas
- Strengthen and direct development towards existing communities
- Provide a variety of transportation choices
- Make development decisions predictable, fair, and cost effective
- Encourage community and stakeholder collaboration in development decisions

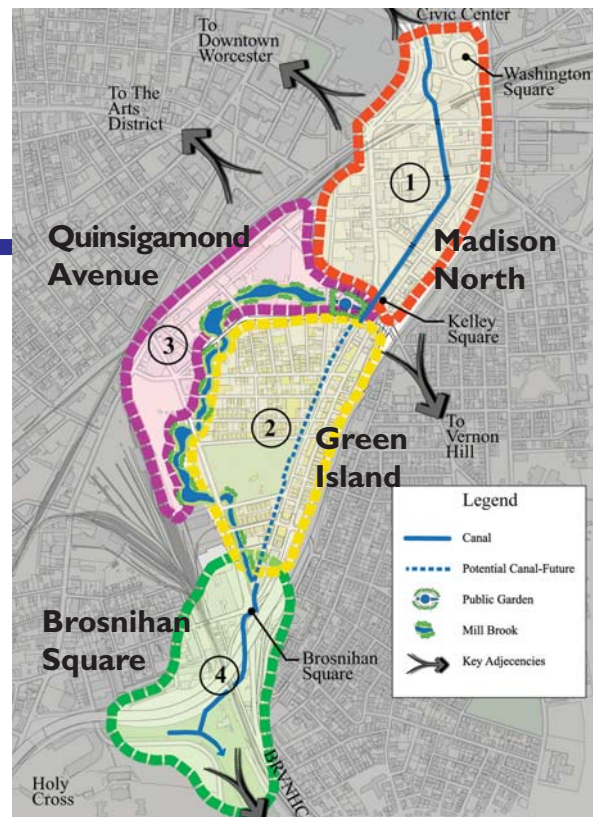
The Plan

This Plan, arrived at through a yearlong, community-driven process, establishes a framework for the revitalization of Worcester's Canal District neighborhood. The Plan outlines a vision for this diverse area, from Washington Square to Brosnihan Square, that builds on its unique history, its culture, its strategic location, and the potential water amenity represented by the Mill Brook and the Blackstone Canal. The Plan demands commitment from major public and private ventures and partnerships.

The Plan calls for actions that respect and improve the existing neighborhood, its residents, its ongoing businesses and organizations, while re-building the Canal District as a new and vibrant 'smart growth', transit-oriented community. The Plan does not mandate or force specific actions on existing property owners. However, the Plan will serve as an agent for action, inspiration and evaluation of individual initiatives, both public and private, proposed in this community in the future.

Based on prior reports, interviews, workshops, field analysis and on-going collaboration with the Blackstone Canal Task Force, as well as a series of public forums, this plan is grounded in a solid understanding of the area's history and its existing conditions. The planning process studied the technical feasibility of daylighting and of re-watering all or portions of the historic Blackstone Canal as it runs through the neighborhood. The market potential of the area has also been analyzed, with and without improvements to the canal.

The Plan assumes a unified strategy for the entire Canal District neighborhood. However, the Plan also recognizes inherent differences within this community, and thus subdivides the District into four distinct sectors. Each sector has its own approach for developing and using its water segment, as part of a comprehensive revitalization strategy. These are introduced below and described in greater detail in the next section - A Tour of the Plan.



Canal District Sectors

Canal District Sectors

The study identified four sectors, each of which has its own set of physical, social, land use and economic characteristics, and consequent issues and opportunities. These are indicated in the diagram above.

Sector 1- Madison North

From Washington Square/ Union Station to Kelley Square

Sector 2- Green Island

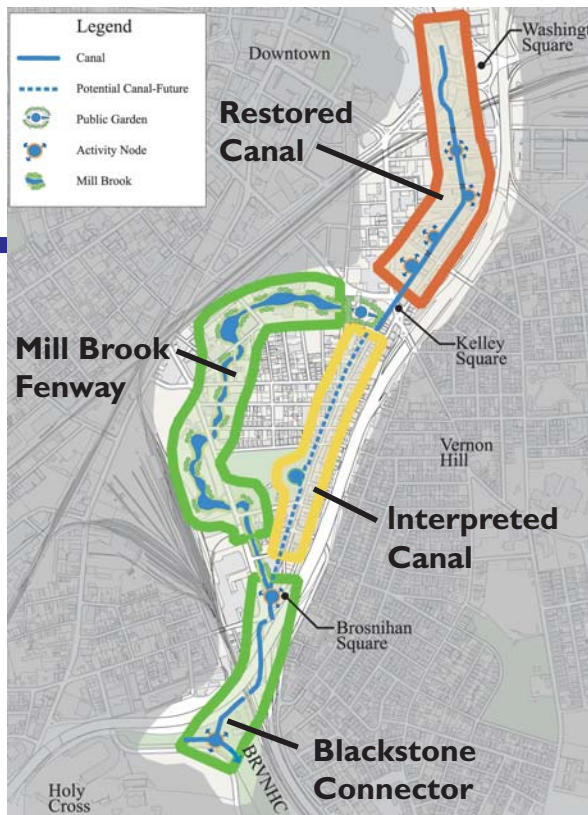
From Kelley Square to Brosnihan Square

Sector 3- Quinsigamond Avenue

Wyman Gordon properties and the area west of Quinsigamond Avenue

Sector 4- Brosnihan Square

Brosnihan Square to the Middle River



For any investment of public funds on the Blackstone Canal to have major and lasting economic impact, the project should be of the scale and vision of the original construction project laid out in the early 1800's.

Water Segments

Water Segments

It is recommended that specific treatments of the historic Blackstone Canal and the Mill Brook system, that run through the Canal District, be developed on a sector by sector basis.

Sector 1- Restored Canal

Development of a fully re-created canal, with direct public access unto the water surface, as catalyst for major building reuse and new development.

Sector 2- Interpreted Canal

Emphasize an interpreted historic Blackstone Canal narrative landscape down Harding Street, through the use of paving, signage exhibits and banners.

Sector 3- A Mill Brook Fenway

Recreate and expand the original Mill Brook setting within a 'Fenway-styled' linear park.

Sector 4- The Blackstone Connector

Retain a visible water connection all the way to the Blackstone River.

The revitalization concepts for the Canal District are clear. As with any master plan, this one must be dynamic, with easily understandable goals and objectives. The plan must be flexible and encompass social, economic and physical realities. It must be inclusive, particularly regarding its neighbors and public and private stakeholders.